

THE ZOROASTRIAN DIASPORA IN EUROPE 1976-2003
A LONGITUNDINAL STUDY 1976-2003

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE PAPER

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with Zoroastrians, a minority religious group, which has its modern origins in the sub-continent of India and Iran. The Zoroastrian religion has its distant origins in the ideas and myths of the Stone Age pastoralist peoples of the area of the south Russian steppes, to the east of the river Volga. The basic religious objects of Zoroastrianism, fire and water, originate from the religious objects of these Stone Age peoples. The Zoroastrian religion also inherited the ideas of purity and pollution, and of maintaining the world on its proper course, with the priests acting on behalf of mankind in conjunction with the Gods, from the ideas and myths of these peoples. ¹ Zarathustra is the earliest known prophet of a prophetic religion and he is thought to have lived between 1500-1200 B.C. Today, the Zoroastrian religion can be practised at home or away from home; it is a religion that can easily be carried by Zoroastrians in their Diaspora around the world. Initiation ceremonies take place in the home or a hall; wedding ceremonies are conducted in wedding halls; funeral services in the Dokhmas or crematoriums. The priests attend all three religious ceremonies which do not take place in the Fire Temples of the 'old country' or prayer rooms in the 'new country'. The priests can be asked to conduct religious ceremonies at Fire Temple or prayer room on behalf of the lay person, including the prayers for the deceased and there is no need for the lay person to be present. The lay person is enjoined to pray at certain times of the day and to wear their religious garments, the Sedreh/ Sudre and Pushi/ Kusti, as well as observing the religious purity laws in their daily lives, in order to work with Ahura Mazda in the ever constant battle against evil. When Zoroastrians become ritually polluted they can undergo certain ritual ceremonies to restore

them to ritual purity. The pure is that which is in the state God intended it to be, free from all evil, physical or spiritual. Ritual purity does not necessarily coincide with hygienic cleanliness and ritual pollution does not necessarily coincide with dirt. Zoroastrian rituals, and also prayers, are performed in the presence of the sacred fire and this can be the fire in the temple or a simple hearth fire or an oil lamp in the home. Zoroastrians homes have a corner where they keep the oil lamp and their other religious objects and where they pray at the required times during the day. Zoroastrians can pray outside the home and they can be seen at sunset in Mumbai on the beach praying facing the setting sun, but it can be any stretch of running water, not stagnant water, such as the Pacific Ocean in California or a running stream in Iran. This is a religion that can be a private matter for the individual person, apart from the ceremonies of initiation, marriage, death and certain purification rituals. It can also be a public religion when Zoroastrians visit the Fire Temple or prayer room or take part in religious rituals or ceremonies or pray in public such as on the beach in Mumbai or taking part in inter-faith activity in the UK.

The Zoroastrian community in Europe is small and it is concentrated in the South East corner of England. The 2001 census lists 3,738 people in England and Wales who affirmed that they were Zoroastrian with a further 56 in Scotland but no one in Northern Ireland. However, it was not compulsory to answer the question about religious affiliation on the 2001 UK census form and not everyone wanted to commit to a government paper their religious affiliation. In the 2003 survey there was one reply questionnaire sent from Northern Ireland and one from Ireland. Zoroastrians in the UK, Ireland and the two hundred in mainland Europe who were members of WZO or ZTFE, were sent questionnaires. Therefore it is estimated, taking into account the census figures and the numbers of known Zoroastrians in

mainland Europe, that there are at least 4,000 Zoroastrians in Europe, plus those people who are Zoroastrian by descent and who for whatever reason or reasons, have drifted away or never been part of the community. It is thought that there are 1,000 Zoroastrians in Europe who are not members of Zoroastrian organisations.² It is not known how many people the latter group would encompass. The research reported in this paper is essentially based upon people who are members of the Zoroastrian organisations, World Zoroastrian Organisation (WZO) and Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe (ZTFE).

| The paper will report and discuss the results of the 2003 survey of Zoroastrians in Europe and compare it with the European section of the 1985 survey of the world wide Zoroastrian Diaspora of 1985 and the 1976 survey of Zoroastrians in the UK. The 2003 survey grew out of the 1985 and 1976 surveys. This is original longitudinal research and has never been conducted before in the UK on a religious group from South East Asia. It will also report on the data generated by the questions relating to religious purity in the 2003 survey.

| This paper will not be a textual study or a sociological study of a community. It will be a study of a living religious group in Europe in 2003. Sociological tools will be used for the analyses. The main emphasis will be on the religious aspects of the Zoroastrians in Europe in 2003.

THE 1976, 1985, 1988 AND 2003 SURVEYS

The 1976 survey was carried out by Professor John Hinnells, under the auspices of the Department of Comparative Religion, the University of Manchester and the Open University, Milton Keynes. The author met with Professor Hinnells in 1979 and offered to collate the data from the 1976 survey and conduct analyses on it at Bryn Mawr College, USA, where she was then studying. In the

early 1980s Professor Hinnells and the author collaborated on developing another questionnaire based on the 1976 questionnaire and what was learned from the data generated by that survey. The author conducted a pre-test of the 1985 questionnaire in the US. The 1985 questionnaire was a much longer and more detailed questionnaire than the 1976 questionnaire with regard to the questions on religion, as well as those about demography and the social experiences of the respondents. This time, the survey covered the world wide Diaspora of Zoroastrians and there were over 1,840 responses from all over the world: North America, Australia, Africa, China, and Europe. In 2003 another survey was conducted by the author within the area of Western Europe. Again the 2003 questionnaire was developed from the last questionnaire, and what was learned from the data that was generated by the 1985 survey. The 2003 survey had the largest number of respondents of the three surveys in Europe as well as being the longest questionnaire and it generated enough data to support at least three PhD theses. ³ The questionnaires from the three surveys are in Appendix A.

In the comparison of the three surveys, the differences and the similarities between them will be discussed and elaborated upon. Are the respondents' responses to the questions about religious practices and beliefs different between the 1976 survey, the 1985 survey and those in the 2003 survey? Is there any continuity between the respondents' attitudes to the religious practices and beliefs in the three surveys? What are the similarities and differences between the women's and the men's attitudes to the religious practices and beliefs in the three surveys? Do the women regard their religion as a private matter whereas men view their religion as a public matter? What are the similarities and differences in the demographic profiles of the three surveys?

The three surveys will be introduced by looking at where the respondents lived at the time of the surveys, starting with table 1: '2003 survey: The place the respondents live now' and followed by a comparison of the places that the respondents lived at the time of the 1976, 1985 and 2003 surveys.

THE PLACE OF RESIDENCE OF THE RESPONDENTS IN 2003

In table 1 **N** indicates the number of respondents, **Place** lists the places where the respondents lived at the time of the 2003 surveys.

TABLE 1 2003 SURVEY: THE PLACE THE RESPONDENTS LIVE NOW		
Place	Percentage	N
London	52%	318
Home Counties	27%	166
Midlands	6%	35
East of England	2%	12
West of England	3.5%	24
North of England	3%	21
Wales	.5%	3
Ireland	.3%	2
Scotland	.5%	3
Germany	2%	15
Switzerland	.1%	1
Netherlands	.1%	1
France	.3%	2
No response	2%	11

It can be seen that there were few responses (2%) from mainland Europe and Ireland and the majority of the responses come from the southeast corner of England. However, this paper report and a discussion about the analyses of a questionnaire that was sent to all the known Zoroastrians in Europe in 2003, and although the majority of the responses came from the Southeast corner of England, it remains a survey of Zoroastrians in Europe and will be called this.

TABLE 2 1976, 1985 AND 2003: A COMPARISON OF THE PLACES THE RESPONDENTS LIVE NOW		
Place	Percentage	N
London		
1976	52%	163
1985	51%	252
2003	52%	318
Home counties		
1976	27%	84
1985	32%	160
2003	27%	166
Midlands		
1976	8%	25
1985	3%	15
2003	6%	35
East of England		
1976	3%	9
1985	3%	15
2003	2%	12

TABLE 2 1976, 1985 AND 2003: A COMPARISON OF THE PLACES THE RESPONDENTS LIVE NOW		
West of England		
1976	4%	13
1985	2%	8
2003	3.5%	24
North of England		
1976	3%	10
1985	5%	24
2003	3%	21
Wales		
1976	1%	2
1985	1%	7
2003	.5%	3
Scotland		
1976	2%	5
1985	1%	7
2003	.5%	3
Guernsey		
1976		
1985	1%	5
2003		
Germany		
1976		
1985	.4%	2
2003	2%	15
Switzerland		
1976		
1985	.2%	1
2003	.1%	1

TABLE 2 1976, 1985 AND 2003: A COMPARISON OF THE PLACES THE RESPONDENTS LIVE NOW		
Netherlands		
1976		
1985	.2%	1
2003	.1%	1
France		
1976		
1985		
2003	.3%	2
No response		
1976	1%	3
1985	.2%	1
2003	2%	11

As can be seen from the table 2: '1976, 1985 and 2003: A comparison of the places the respondents live now', the profile of the respondent's current place of abode in all three surveys is roughly similar but with the addition of people from Ireland and mainland Europe in 1985 and 2003. The 'no response' is higher at 2%, (11), in the 2003 survey than in the surveys of 1976 and 1985. Maybe the 2003 survey is picking up respondents who converted from Islam to Zoroastrianism when they arrived in Europe from Iran. There have been over 100 conversions of such people in the UK and they would not want their addresses known: it is an

¹ Boyce Mary, *Zoroastrians their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, pp. 1-29

² Hinnells J.R., letter 12 September, 2003

³ See Appendix E,

offence punishable by death in Islam to convert to another religion.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE ZOROASTRIAN COMMUNITY IN EUROPE

The Zoroastrian community in Europe is composed of three groups of people who either came from, or are descended from people who came from, one of three distinct areas of the world: Iran, the Indian sub-continent and East Africa. The last group's origins were in the sub-continent and they are known as 'twice migrants'. They are important because of the impact they have had on the community in Europe in spite of their low numbers. People or groups of people who migrate onwards from their first destination tend to try to preserve their culture as it was in the 'old country'.⁴ In the case of the Zoroastrians, they migrated during the era of the British Empire, from the sub-continent of India to East Africa and then in the 1970s migrated onwards to Europe. In Africa, the social system was caste like in its rigidity with the different ethnic groups of people staying within their own groupings. The people of Indian descent were ranked higher in the social system than the people of African origin, but they were all subject to the governance of the ruling group, the British. In this type of social system the Zoroastrians preserved their religion and cultures as they had been in the sub-continent. As the Zoroastrians in the sub-continent changed their attitudes towards their religion and cultures, the Zoroastrians in Africa did not change in the same way. When the two groups migrated to Europe and met in London they had different approaches to the religion, with the 'African' Zoroastrians maintaining a religious orthodoxy that was different from 'Indian' Zoroastrians attitudes to and practice of the religion.

⁴ Bachu P., *Twice Migrants*, Tavistock Press, London, 1985

As the Zoroastrians who emigrated onwards from Africa to Europe have risen in the ranks of ZTFE, which is based in London, the religious aspects of the organisation have become more inward looking and their reference for authority in religious matters is India rather than Europe or North America. It was a priest who had migrated from Africa to London who caused controversy within the community when he asked a non-Zoroastrian to leave the Favardigan/ Muktaḍ ceremonies for her late husband, who had been the president of ZTFE in London. She had always attended these particular religious memorial services conducted in memory of her late husband.⁵ The controversy caused bitterness within the community and several members resigned from ZTFE, including my father-in-law. This incident crystallised the differences between the two groups of Parsis within the Zoroastrian community in Europe.

The Iranians are different from both groups of Parsis. The Iranians have a different religious and cultural background from the Parsis.

⁵ Hinnells J.R., *The Zoroastrian Diaspora, Religion and Migration*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, p385

The author spoke with Ervad Sethna on the telephone 22/06/07.

Sethna was the priest involved in the controversy at the Muktaḍ ceremony for the Zoroastrian president of ZTFE, as mentioned in the text. He explained to the author over the telephone that non-Zoroastrians are polluting at all Zoroastrian religious ceremonies or in religious places because they have not undergone Naujote and are not wearing the Sudre/ Kusti and are therefore not ritually pure. The wife had to be excluded from the memorial ceremonies because as a non-Zoroastrian she was ritually impure.

Most of them were political refugees from a country where their religion was barely tolerated by the government and their Muslim neighbours. Their attitudes to Zoroastrianism reflect the dominant cultural ideas of Iran and their background of growing up as a minority religious group in a Muslim country. In Iran, conversion is a theoretical possibility, though not away from Islam. The emphasis in the religion is on the words of the prophet alone and not on later priestly texts and interpretation of the prophet's words. Iranian Zoroastrians do not support Zoroastrian/ non-Zoroastrian marriages because of the rigid prohibition of such marriages in Iran, unless of course it is with the non-Muslim partner converting Islam. There are other religious groups in Iran, including Jews and Christians, and the rigid prohibition of inter-group religious marriages applies to them as well as to the Zoroastrian.

Zoroastrians have been coming to and settling in the UK and later in mainland Europe, since the mid-19th century and Zoroastrianism was the first formal South East Asian religion to be established in the UK in 1861. The migration backwards and forwards to and from the UK was and is a feature of community life. Few European born Zoroastrians responded to the postal surveys, only up to 19% in the 2003 survey, which is not large considering the length of time of Zoroastrians' contact with and living in Europe. The places that the respondents came from to Europe for all three surveys are given in table 3: '1976, 1985 and 2003 surveys: The place the respondents came from to Europe'. As can be seen, although the percentage of respondents from the total group coming from India has dropped over the three surveys, the raw numbers have increased. Also, both the percentage and numbers of respondents who were born in Europe has increased, as has the number of respondents from Iran and the 'rest of the world', but the percentages of the total group for Iran and the 'rest of the world'

have stayed the same. The number of respondents coming from Africa and Pakistan has dropped, both in percentage terms and in numbers, from the 1985 survey to the 2003 survey. There are no more Zoroastrians to come to Europe from East Africa because most of them were forced out in the late 1960s/ early 1970s. The few Zoroastrians who have remained in Kenya are migrating onwards to North America and not to Europe. Similarly there are few Zoroastrians left in Pakistan and their numbers are dwindling by the month as they migrate to North America, but not to Europe.⁶ Even Zoroastrians in India are arranging to have a child born in the USA so that there is one US passport in the family if it should be needed.⁷

⁶ Cowasjee Hutoxy, The editor of the Zoroastrian magazine *Hamazor*, was keeping a count of the numbers of Zoroastrians migrating to North America from Pakistan in the late 1990s when they were leaving at the rate of one family per month. The elderly Zoroastrians were left behind in Pakistan. In 1989 there were according to Cowasjee, 2,000 Zoroastrians left in Pakistan. The author in conversation with Hutoxy Cowasjee in Karachi, Pakistan, 1989

⁷ The author learnt in conversation with Zoroastrians in Mumbai in the late 1990s. The same -thing was happening in Pakistan but not to such an extent as in India.

TABLE 3 1976, 1985 AND 2003 SURVEYS: THE PLACES THE RESPONDENTS CAME FROM TO EUROPE		
Place	Percentage	N
India		
1976	73%	230
1985	51%	253
2003	50%	302
Pakistan		
1976	8%	25
1985	8%	40
2003	5%	33
Africa		
1976	11%	36
1985	24%	121
2003	18%	109
Iran		
1976	2%	7
1985	4%	18
2003	4%	25
Rest of world		
1976	2%	6
1985	3%	17
2003	3%	19
Born in Europe		
1976	3%	10
1985	8%	39
2003	19%	115

THE RESEARCH INTO THE ZOROASTRIAN DISAPORA

No other researcher or research team in the UK has done a longitudinal questionnaire survey study of South East Asians of the Diaspora in Europe. ⁸ This is original new research. It is new because it is longitudinal and because it takes significant change into account and also because of what has been learned from perceived weaknesses in the earlier surveys. Although this is new research, it has grown out of earlier work in such a way that the author has been fully prepared and trained, and it is work that only she could do.

In the past twenty five years, British Parsis have consciously moved away from reforming elements in North America and have become much closer in spirit to the 'old country', India. This is recognised in India as well as in the UK. As has been noted, there is a totally different group in power in the Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe (ZTFE), stricter orthodox East African Parsis have prominent positions in the organisation and the religion has become much higher in profile. This is shown in the number of communal ceremonies, the strictness with which they are practised and their understanding of them being substantially different from the 1980s and earlier. In the 1990s there has been the impact of starting to get involved in interfaith work. ⁹ The

⁸ Eleanor Nesbitt and Robert Jackson are conducting, at the University of Warwick, a longitudinal in depth interview study of Hindus in the UK. They interviewed 80 of them at school and these respondents are now post university. The research has been published in odd article form at the moment. Kim Knott at the University of Leeds has undertaken field work among Hindus in Leeds but none of these researchers has undertaken comparable large survey questionnaires.

⁹ Hinnells J.R., *op cit*, p. 385-399

British Zoroastrians asked for the 2003 survey to be conducted because they thought so much had changed within the community since the 1985 survey, such as the interfaith work and the emphasis on more religious ceremonies. Because of the joint ongoing contacts of Professor J.R.Hinnells and the author with the Zoroastrian community, they were aware of this and the 2003 questionnaire was shaped appropriately, with more attention given to laws on purity and pollution which are both at the centre and central to the Zoroastrian religion. Also, statistical work on the 1985 survey indicated that there were questions about the Zoroastrian religion missing from that survey and new types of questions needed to be added to the questionnaire.

In chapter 2, the debates around the advantages and disadvantages of survey work will be discussed. The only published ¹⁰ literature relevant for this longitudinal questionnaire survey research of a South East Asian religious group in Europe, is that of the previous surveys of 1976 and 1985 and so the account of the literature will be confined to them and to similar research work such as that of Choksy in the USA, Mistry and Cama in India, and Hinnells in the UK. It was decided by the author and her supervisor, Professor J.R. Hinnells, partly because there is no real parallel to this research into Zoroastrians in Europe and also, knowing how much work is involved in such a survey, it was decided that the author's time be focused on the survey.

ENDNOTES

¹⁰ See footnote 7.